WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because It Can Give Insight on how to Improve School Safety and Prevent Mass Shootings

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As a new school year begins, it is understandable that students, parents, teachers and the community at large experience both excitement and apprehension. Excitement about a new year of in-person learning, reconnecting with old friends and making new ones, but apprehension about the safety of the school environment. The possibility of school violence occupies the minds of many. While the risk of mass shootings in schools remains exceedingly low, it is essential that we draw on the best data and research available to prevent such events and mitigate all manner of threats to school and student safety.

As the directors of two federal agencies tasked with collecting crime and justice data and advancing scientific research to enhance public safety and the administration of justice, we want to highlight some of what we know about school safety and mass shootings.

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What do we know?

First, as documented in a recent [report](#) produced jointly by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Institute of Education Sciences, in the Department of Education, over the last decade, several crime and safety issues have become less prevalent at elementary and secondary schools. Nonetheless, there were 93 school shootings with casualties at elementary and secondary schools in 2020-2021 — the highest since the 2000-2001 school year.

Second, we have learned a lot about the individuals who attempt or carry out mass shootings in school settings. As documented in a recent National Institute of Justice [research report](#), most people are in a crisis leading up to the shooting and are likely to disclose their plans to others, presenting opportunities for intervention. While there is no reliable trait or profile of someone who engages in a violent act, the overwhelming majority of people who commit K-12 mass shootings engage in warning behaviors and have ties to the school. Lastly, people who commit a school shooting are most likely to obtain a weapon by theft from a family member — underscoring another potential intervention point, as well as the need for more secure firearm storage practices.

What can we do?

First off, everyone can be involved in the prevention of mass shootings. Paying attention to warning signs is one such approach, as mass shooters typically communicate their intentions in some manner, whether verbally or through social media. The focus should be on such warning signs rather than on mental health diagnoses, which are not an effective predictor of violence. Communities can also work together to promote school safety more broadly by addressing student victimization and trauma, recognizing and reporting bullying and threats of violence, and following up consistently. Tip lines hold promise in affording students a safe and anonymous or confidential means of sharing concerns about their peers without fear of retribution.

Second, threat assessment, when implemented appropriately, can be a promising prevention strategy to assess and take actions to prevent potential mass shooting events, as well as other potential threats of violence. Having a mechanism in place to collect information on threats of possible school violence and thwarted attempts nationwide can also build knowledge of effective prevention strategies. The Department of Justice-funded National Police Institute's Averted School Violence Database was developed for this purpose and continues to be refined and expanded upon.

Third, as we move into a post-COVID-19 world, we need to be mindful that the past two years has taken a toll on youth and their families. From lost educational experiences to lost family members, youth have struggled academically, emotionally, socially, and mentally. Prioritizing their mental health will be critical as we seek to rebound from the effects of the pandemic and emerge stronger —and safer — than before.

The end goal is clear: We all want our schools to be places of learning, where knowledge is gained and the nation's next set of leaders is fostered. To achieve that goal, schools need to be safe. Kids need to feel secure. And the dedicated faculty and staff who work tirelessly day in and day out investing in our children's futures need to do their jobs free from fear of danger, both for themselves and for their students. Data and research evidence can help build the knowledge and the tools that will allow teachers to focus on sharing the joys of learning and help ensure bright and safe futures for our nation's children.

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